

Cherokee women

Before the arrival of Europeans in North America, women enjoyed a major role in the family life, economy, and government of the Cherokee Indians. Cherokee society was organized according to a matrilineal kinship system, and women were the heads of households. Women also did most of the farming and had a voice in government.

BY THEDA PERDUE

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Long before the arrival of the white man, women enjoyed a major role in the family life, economy, and government of the Cherokee Indians. The Cherokees originally lived in villages built along the rivers of western North Carolina, northwestern South Carolina, northern Georgia, and eastern Tennessee. When white men visited these villages in the early 1700s, they were surprised by the rights and privileges of Indian women.

Perhaps most surprising to Europeans was the Cherokees' matrilineal kinship system. In a matrilineal kinship system, a person is related *only* to people on his mother's side. His relatives are those who can be traced through a woman. In this way a child is related to his mother, and through her to his brothers and sisters. He also is related to his mother's mother (grandmother), his mother's brothers (uncles), and his mother's sisters (aunts). The child is not related to the father, however. The most important male relative in a child's life is his mother's brother. Many Europeans never figured out how this kinship system worked. Those white men who married Indian women were shocked to discover that the Cherokees did not consider them to be related to their own children, and that mothers, not fathers, had control over the children.

Europeans also were astonished that women were the heads of Cherokee households. The Cherokees lived in extended families. This means that several generations (grandmother, mother, grandchildren) lived together as one family. Such a large family needed a number of different buildings. The roomy summer house was built of bark. The tiny winter house had thick clay walls and a roof, which kept in the heat from a fire smoldering on a central hearth. The household also had corn cribs and storage sheds. All these buildings belonged to the women in the family, and daughters inherited them from their mothers. A husband lived in the household of his wife (and her mother and sisters).

If a husband and wife did not get along and decided to separate, the husband went home to his mother while any children remained with the wife in her home.

The family had a small garden near their houses and cultivated a particular section of the large fields which lay outside the village. Although men helped clear the fields and plant the crops, women did most of the farming because men were usually at war during the summer. The women used stone hoes or pointed sticks to cultivate corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, and sunflowers. Old women sat on platforms in the fields and chased away any crows or raccoons that tried to raid the fields.

In the winter when men traveled hundreds of miles to hunt bears, deer, turkeys, and other game, women stayed at home. They kept the fires burning in the winter houses, made baskets, pottery, clothing, and other things the family needed, cared for the children, and performed the chores for the household.

Perhaps because women were so important in the family and in the economy, they also had a voice in government. The Cherokees made decisions only after they discussed an issue for a long time and agreed on what they should do. The council meetings at which decisions were made were open to everyone including women. Women participated actively. Sometimes they urged the men to go to war to avenge an earlier enemy attack. At other times they advised peace. Women occasionally even fought in battles beside the men. The Cherokees called these women “War Women,” and all the people respected and honored them for their bravery.

By the 1800s the Cherokees had lost their independence and had become dominated by white Americans. At this time white Americans did not believe that it was proper for women to fight wars, vote, speak in public, work outside the home, or even control their own children. The Cherokees began to imitate whites, and Cherokee women lost much of their power and prestige. In the twentieth century, all women have had to struggle to acquire many of those rights which Cherokee women once freely enjoyed.

Color Quatie’s family

The black disc in the diagram below is Quatie, a Cherokee girl. Can you figure out which of the people in the diagram belong to her family and color them in? Remember, in early Cherokee culture the family unit was traced through the wives and not the husbands. The major members in each family were the mothers, aunts, grandmothers, brothers, and uncles, not fathers. After you color your choices, draw a big circle around all the people who would live together in the same household. (Clue: This answer would include fathers.)

You can print a full-page version¹ (PDF format), then check your answer².

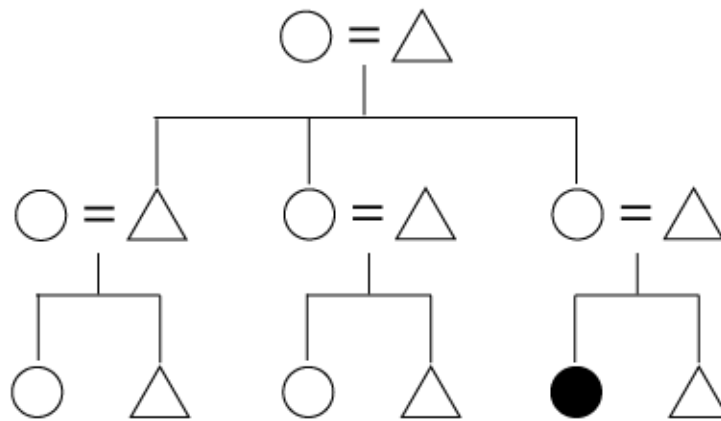
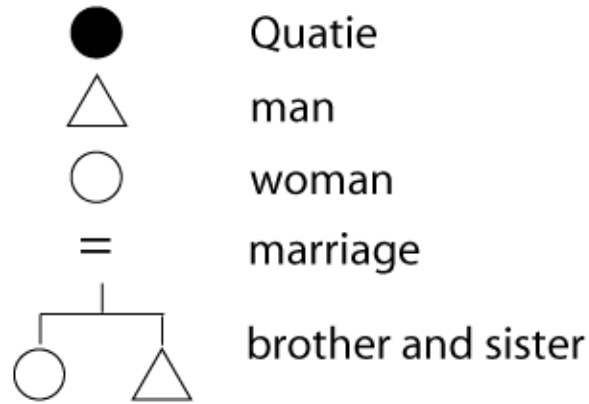


Figure 1.

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Notes

1. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/media/uploads/2007/11/cherokee-kinship-question.pdf>.
2. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/multimedia/7267>.

About the author

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Theda Perdue is Atlanta Distinguished Term Professor of Southern Culture in the history department at UNC - Chapel Hill. Her research focuses on the Native peoples of the southeastern United States, on gender in Native societies, and on racial construction in the South. Her book,

Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835 (1998), won the Julia Cherry Spruill Award for the best book in southern women's history and the James Mooney Prize for the best book in the anthropology of the South. More recently, she has edited an anthology, *Sifters: The Lives of Native American Women* (2001), for which she wrote an essay, "Catherine Brown: Cherokee Convert to Christianity," as well as the introduction. In conjunction with Professor Michael D. Green, she has published *The Columbia Guide to American Indians of the Southeast* (2001) and *The Cherokee Removal: A Brief History with Documents* (1995, 2nd ed., 2005). In October 2001, Professor Perdue delivered the Lamar Lectures at Mercer University, published as "*Mixed Blood*" *Indians: Racial Construction in the Early South* (2003). She has served as president of the Southern Association for Women Historians (1985-86) and the American Society for Ethnohistory (2001).

Professor Perdue currently is working on a book on Indians in the segregated South. In 2006-2007, she is a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C.. She also has a John Simon Guggenheim Foundation fellowship.

Image credits

Figure 1 (page 3)

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